

Social Media Policy & Planning Workgroup : Twitter toolkit

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Twitter toolkit

Introduction

"I just don't get Twitter."

"Twitter is just a frivolous waste of time for self obsessed egomaniacs."

How many times have you heard comments like these?

Twitter is the fastest growing platform in social media today. Businesses, governments and individuals are all "tweeting" or "twittering". As of September 14, 2009 research firm eMarketer estimated that Twitter has at least [18 million users](#) (Wall Street Journal, 9/14/09) who log on once per month.

Twitter is a form of "microblogging", which limits posts to 140 characters. Posts to Twitter, or "tweets" must be short and comprehensive. They should also be of interest to your target audience. Tweets are seen by people who "follow" your agency on Twitter. Therefore, if no one finds you compelling enough to follow on Twitter, then no one gets the message. "If an agency tweeted in the woods and no one read it, would it make a sound?"

Creating interesting content in 140 characters takes time and effort.

How can you decide if Twitter is a useful platform, or a waste of limited resources? How can you make 140 characters matter?

The Basic Terminology

- **Tweet**: 140 character message posted on or to Twitter that is viewable to anyone on the web
- **Followers/Following**: people on Twitter can choose to "follow" each other. If Joe follows Susan, when Joe logs into Twitter, he will see Susan's tweets along with anyone else he is following. Number of followers is one way people measure how popular someone is on Twitter.
- **Timeline**: your public timeline is all of your tweets in reverse chronological order
- **ReTweet**: a way to resend a Tweet someone else has posted while giving them attribution/credit. For example, if Susan posts an interesting Tweet (Big sale at the corner store today!) and Joe thinks his followers would be interested in that, as well, he can ReTweet it (RT @Susan Big sale at the corner store today!)
- **@ reply** (or "at reply"): a way to publicly respond to or ask a question of someone else on Twitter (@Susan Did you get anything good at the sale?)
- **@ mention** (or "at mention"): a way to reference another Twitter user in your Tweet (I just went to the corner store and saw @Susan there. Love her!)
- **Direct Message**: a way to privately tweet with another user. This only works if both people are following each other. (D @Susan Any secrets on how to get more money off at the sale??)
- **Hashtag** (the # symbol followed by a word or characters): a way to tag a conversation so that others can find it. For example, people who are talking about the show "Glee" are using the hashtag #Glee. So, if Susan loves talking about the show "Glee" and want to see what other people are saying about the show, she can search for tweets that have #Glee and see what others are saying and if she wants to share her thoughts with that community, she includes #Glee in her tweets on that topic, as well.

Preliminary Steps

Identify how/if Twitter will help you meet your business goals

The benefits to using Twitter are:

1. **Rapid distribution of information**. In addition to the low barrier to joining Twitter, your information may be redistributed or "re-tweeted" by your followers. Therefore, your information may get more widely distributed than through more traditional media channels.
 - a. **Emergency communications**. Several public safety agencies are also using Twitter as a means of emergency management communications. For example, visit the [Los Angeles Fire Department](#) on Twitter.

- b. "Rapid response" communications. Twitter provides a unique and effective way to deal with [crises and other fire drills](#). Sometimes, failure to engage on Twitter will lengthen the duration of the crisis, because only the problem, and not your solution, are being "re-tweeted".
2. Engagement and conversation platform. In addition to giving your agency an avenue for distribution of information, your agency can use Twitter as a way to communicate directly with your constituents. People may message you directly by mentioning you in a tweet (eg @massgov) or by sending you a direct message (eg d @massgov). Twitter provides another avenue for outreach for people who might not contact you by telephone, email or mail. For example, visit [Southwest Airlines](#) on Twitter
3. Public opinion research. Some say Twitter is the [new search engine](#). Regardless of whether or not it is about to give Google a run for its money, Twitter does provide an easy way to search for community opinion about your agency. You might also hear this practice referred to as "crowd-sourcing". Regular searching of "tweets" might make you aware of a public relations issue, a wide-spread constituent concern, or simply allow you to reach out to someone who needs help.

Identify your content

About what will you tweet?

Outbound communications

1. Most government agencies use Twitter for outbound communications of official statements. It is certainly expected that you will use this as a component of your Twitter strategy. One question you should ask is whether it will be the exclusive component of your Twitter strategy?
2. Will you manually tweet your official communications (ie, press releases, news and media events, etc.)
3. Will you send items to Twitter automatically using RSS?
 - a. According to Jeffrey Levy, the [US EPA Twitter account](#) is populated through an automated RSS feed consisting of news and blog releases. They do not personally enter any information on Twitter. They disclose this information in their profile. They still have over 3,500 followers. That said, they have several different Twitter accounts, which appear to be managed by either different EPA regions or serve different functions. Not all EPA Twitter accounts are automated.
 - b. Automatically tweeting your RSS feed often requires use of a third party application. The most frequently used application is [Twitterfeed](#).

Using Twitter exclusively for outbound communications is not necessarily a bad thing as long as you manage expectations. In your bio, you should mention that the content generation is automated so people are less likely to anticipate a response if you are mentioned. That said, you should monitor direct messages to make sure you aren't missing any communications.

Inbound communications and engagement

1. Respond to direct Tweets and mentions. The more you engage online, the more you will be approached privately through "direct message" (ie: d @massgov) and publicly through "at replies" (@massgov). You should be prepared to respond to comments and questions when appropriate.
2. Start conversations and solicit mentions and Tweets. You can also use Twitter to send questions out to your followers. If you use a hashtag (the # symbol with a word or characters after it), you can also search on responses to that question exclusively, allowing you to more efficiently review your responses to gather intelligence.
3. Search and respond to mentions of your "brand". Perhaps people aren't tweeting to you, but about you. To find out what people are writing, use [search.twitter.com](#) or other automated Twitter search platforms to scan the Twitter-sphere. When helpful, you might want to engage with directly with people discussing your agency.

Combination of inbound and outbound communications

1. The [Governor's office](#) uses both inbound and outbound communications techniques to distribute official communications, answer constituent and media questions and solicit feedback.

Identify your process

Who will you follow?

Everyone? No one? In-between?

Social media experts all have different takes on the "following" question. Should you follow everyone who follows you? In the early days of Twitter, that was considered the norm. Following everyone who follows you does seem to dramatically increase your number of followers. The more followers you have, the more people receive your message. Governor Schwarzenegger has over 1 million followers. His press office believes it is because they follow everyone who follows them.

That said, not all followers are necessarily interested in your tweets. You will get people following you to spam you, solicit you and engage in other undesirable behavior.

Many government agencies adopt policies of only following other government agencies. This is thought to give their Twitter accounts increased authenticity.

As a government actor, it is important to distinguish between political and governmental activities. Therefore, it is advisable that you follow a political office rather than a political candidate, eg: <http://twitter.com/MASSTreasury> versus <http://twitter.com/TimForGovernor>

Who is responsible for maintaining Twitter ties?

Do you want to assign Twitter to one person on your team? Multiple people?

Maintaining a presence on Twitter can be time consuming. It is generally recommended that more than one person be responsible for monitoring the account and responding to tweets. Additionally, a rotation should be established to ensure that there are no lapses in coverage. Failure to respond on Twitter can quickly and easily be communicated to the "twittersphere" resulting in lost credibility.

There are several different third party applications that can be used to help facilitate this process.

The security office recommends against the use of [Tweetdeck](#) at this time, due to a known vulnerability which transmits passwords in an insecure fashion.

Additionally, we recommend that you do not use any kind of web based third party applications, including those for account management, which require your password. As an alternative, we recommend that you only use applications that use the OAuth standard, which allows third party applications to interact with your Twitter account on your behalf without any exchange of your password. [Co-tweet](#) is an example of such an application.

Miscellaneous issues

Format issues

Shrinking links

Because of the 140 character restriction in Twitter, most people who post links use a link shortening service. There are a number of different sites that will [shorten your urls](#), including [Bit.ly](#), [Ow.ly](#), and [TinyURL](#). Bit.ly is the default link shortener used if you enter links directly into Twitter. Each shortening service has unique features, such as statistics for clicks. Additionally, most Twitter account management services include built-in link shortening options.

These services replace the original link with a shortened url. There is some ambiguity about what happens if the shortening service goes down or out of business. In the past, this meant that the shortened link becomes a dead link. However, many shortening services today are working on building redundancy and archives into their systems. That said, at this point in time, there is no way to guarantee that a shortened link will always be available.

Use of hash tags to parse content

One of the trends on Twitter is to use a short, unique term followed by a "hash tag" or pound sign (#) to allow for filtering on a particular phrase. For example, Government 2.0 is often referred to as #gov20. Conferences often assign a hash tag so that people interested can search on it and find targeted tweets. You should consider creating and following hash tags for targeted campaigns.

Mandatory policy considerations

Document retention issues

All Tweets sent, and all direct messages sent and received, are considered public records. Therefore, it is important to archive these tweets in order to comply with state law.

The easiest way to archive these tweets is from within Twitter itself.

When logged into Twitter, you can find a list of all Tweets sent, excluding direct Tweets sent, by clicking on the Tweets link under your user name and avatar.

In order to find all direct messages, sent and received, click on the direct messages link. You will see different tabs for your direct message inbox, and direct message sent.

All messages can be copied and pasted into a file (notepad, Microsoft Word, Microsoft Excel, etc.). When you do this, make sure to include a line about the date and time of the information transfer. The tweets sent within the last 24 hours have a timestamp that mentions "x minutes, hours" ago rather than an actual date.

How often should you do this? It depends on your volume. We recommend downloading your tweets at least once per week.

Why are we suggesting this process? Twitter only saves your last 1500 tweets. Additionally, you may lose all tweets if Twitter experiences some technical failure. By taking these precautions you know that your public records retention requirements have been met.

Several third party applications may be used to simplify this process. When selecting a third party application, be careful to comply with all security, procurement and other state requirements.

Other social media policies

Please make sure you are complying with all general policies pertaining to social media engagement, including updating your website terms of use, your website privacy policy, and creation and maintenance of your social media policies. Please feel free to contact Stephanie Zierten, ITD Deputy Counsel, if you have any questions (Stephanie.Zierten@state.ma.us).

Security Considerations

All accounts must use strong passwords.

- By using strong passwords, the risk of an attacker guessing or "brute forcing" a password is reduced. ITD recommends that passwords should be at least 8 characters long, contain both upper and lower case characters, a number, and a non-alphanumeric character. This password must not be in use anywhere else

Twitter presents additional unique security risks, due to the many third party applications written for it.

- ITD recommends that any kind of web based third party applications that require your password should not be used. Due to the inability of ITD to verify how the password is being stored and used, we can not ensure that your password will be stored and transmitted in a secure manner.
- As an alternative, we recommend that you only use applications that use the OAuth standard, which allows third party applications to interact with your Twitter account on your behalf without any exchange of your password.

Best Practices for Twitter

1. Be conversational. You only have 140 characters, but make sure they count. Avoiding jargon and government speak will not only save you space, but will make people more likely to engage with you over Twitter.
2. Be transparent. Who exactly is blogging for your agency? Is it a person? Is it a department? Make sure people know how they can reach the party behind the tweets. It makes a big difference in the perceived authenticity of your efforts.

3. Be inquisitive. Ask questions and seek feedback. Use hash tags to keep topics separate. Also, monitor mentions of your agency or "brand". Twitter is a quick way to get opinions on your plans and priorities. By using this two pronged approach, you can get a sense of what is important to others on Twitter.
4. Be responsive. If people mention or directly tweet you, you might want to reply on Twitter. If many people tweet about/to you about a particular issue, you might want to use another medium to respond in more detail, and then tweet the link to your response.
5. Be timely. Do not wait too long to respond to tweets or to post new ones. People will assume that you are not serious about "engagement" which will hurt your credibility with your audience.
6. Be proactive. Make sure you promote your Twitter page. Include a link to your webpage on your Twitter account, and a link to your Twitter account from your webpage. Include it in your formal communications plans. Insert it into your email signatures.
7. Be social. Develop a comprehensive plan for who you will follow. You probably want to follow other agencies and/or "experts" that tweet about your subject area. Re-tweet posts that seem timely and helpful by others concerned with "your" subject.
8. Be realistic. Twitter isn't quite as easy as it seems. You need to plan to devote time and resources to active engagement on Twitter. Additionally, building an audience may take longer than anticipated. Don't let slower than hoped for results diminish your commitment.

Enterprise Branding Recommendations

1. Include a link to your home page in your Twitter profile. This allows potential followers to quickly and easily verify your Twitter account's authenticity.
2. Include a link from your official webpage to your Twitter account. This will help if Twitter decides to "verify" your account.
3. Complete your one line bio. Make sure it includes something about being the "official Twitter account" for your government office. Make sure it includes "The Commonwealth of Massachusetts".
4. Complete your location.
5. Make sure your name includes some form of Massachusetts, ie: MassDOT, MassDPH, MassRecovery. You could also use MA_trans, MA_HHS.
6. Consider including the Massachusetts state seal in your background.
7. Upload an avatar which is easy to read and easily identifiable.
8. [Twitter verification of accounts](#) seems to be very informal at this time. However, it is a good idea to submit a verification request.

Additional Twitter Guidance / Resources

How to feed RSS to Twitter (to be added)

[Webcontent.gov on Microblogging](#)